University of Michigan Press

Chapter Title: Transgender and the Chess Queen in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess
Chapter Author(s): Jenny Adams

Book Title: Medieval Women and Their Objects
Book Editor(s): Jenny Adams, Nancy Mason Bradbury
Published by: University of Michigan Press. (2017)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.9222733.15

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/. Funding is provided by Knowledge Unlatched Select 2020: HSS Backlist.

University of Michigan Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Medieval Women and Their Objects*

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

CHAPTER II

Transgender and the Chess Queen in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess

Jenny Adams

> And this is why it happens that when the pawns go the whole length of the board they become Venuses and are converted into the nature of the queen and like the queen move diagonally.[1]
>
> Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf,
> For in your sowre there lyth no red;
> For, certes, swete, I am but ded.[2]
> (202–4)

Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* opens with a narrator whose insomnia has lasted for a phenomenal eight years. As he bemoans his sleepless state one night, he asks someone near him to fetch him Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, deciding ". . . it better play / Then playe either at ches or tables" (50–51). Although chess and backgammon might provide a distraction, the narrator rejects them in favor of reading, which he imagines as an engaged exchange through which writers can communicate across generations.[3] The *Metamorphoses* contains fables that clerks have "put in rime" for later generations to read and contemplate, and these stories appear "in minde" in ways that accord with the laws of "kinde" (53–56).[4] "Ches," it seems, does not have the same potential.

Yet while the stories from "olde tyme" might reanimate historical figures, they do not animate the narrator, who falls asleep soon after reading a single story in the *Metamorphoses*, and it is in the context of the dream that chess

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

resurfaces. No longer a static (and thus rejected) pastime, the game now possesses reanimating qualities it formerly seemed to lack. The narrator encounters it when in his dream he meets a Black Knight, who recounts the story of his heartbreaking loss at the game:

> At the ches with me she [Fortune] gan to pleye;
> With hir *false draughtes* dyvers *cheating moves*
> She staal on me and tok my fers. (652–54)

In these lines and the ones preceding them, the Black Knight uses chess as an allegory to describe the death of his lover, "Whyt," whom he imagines as a *fers* (or chess queen) Fortune has taken. When the literal-minded narrator fails to understand the lost chess piece as a representation of death, the Black Knight begins to describe his lover in an encomium that takes up most of the poem's remaining lines. If Whyt can be said to come back to partial life through an imagined chess piece, then the Black Knight's loving descriptions of her reanimate her in ways so clear that the narrator still cannot believe she has died.

In this essay I will argue that Chaucer used the metaphor of chess, and specifically the figure of the chess queen, to represent Whyt because it challenges the finality of death. On a narrative level we can see the ways the narrator's own misunderstanding of the allegory prompts an imaginative reanimation. When the narrator fails to make the connection between the lost chess queen and the Black Knight's lover, the knight brings his love back to life through language.[5] But more profoundly and on an allegorical level, to imagine Whyt as a chess piece is to imagine her as a figure perpetually reborn. To some extent, this can be said of all chess pieces, whose "deaths" are reversed once one game ends and another begins. But the queen holds a particular status as it was the only piece that could be "born" or "reborn" during the course of play. Once a medieval player's pawn reached the final line, it automatically became a queen.[6] This had the effect of bringing a captured queen back to life or producing a second queen on the board, one imaginatively forged from the body of the pawn.

I will further argue that the pawn's gender-crossing, which took place upon the moment of pawn promotion, is tightly bound with the chess queen's ability to cross the line that divides animate and inanimate, and it helps Chaucer to produce what Deborah Horowitz describes as "an aesthetic of permeability."[7] Not only did Chaucer's contemporaries recognize what we

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

would call a transgender moment, but the piece itself also carried with it reminders of its previously male identity: thus the promoted pawn's name, the *firzān* or *fers*, a name that hearkened back to the queen's early identity as a male piece. It is no coincidence that the Black Knight repeatedly calls Whyt his *fers*, a word that can mean pawn or queen, and the word that captures the slippage between these two identities. Further enhancing this tie between gender fluidity and animation is the dream frame. Ovid's story, the one the narrator has chosen over chess, is of another queen, Alcyone. Only through mimicking Queen Alcyone in another moment of gender-crossing can the narrator finally fall asleep. In sum, the chess allegory and the Ovidian story that frames it offer vivid connections between gender change and animation, while also making clear the stakes of gender permanence. Indeed, the surest way to stabilize gender in the *Book of the Duchess* is to die.

Before proceeding, I will add that many (myself included) have written about the chess allegory in the *Book of the Duchess*.[8] But all of us have grounded our arguments on a static notion of chess as played in fourteenth-century England. In other words, we have read the chess queen as a queen, the king as a king, the game as a whole as a fixed object without taking into account its historical permutations and changes. In this essay, I want to depart from that model to consider the detritus that clung to the game as it passed through players and regions, and to consider the ways chess's polychronic meanings might open new ways to understand this moment, which thus might in turn have implications for the ways we read other chess scenes in medieval literature.

THE *FERS* AND/AS THE QUEEN

The central moment in the *Book of the Duchess* takes place when Fortune takes the Black Knight's "fers." This act signals the end of the game, the death of Whyt, the bereavement of the Black Knight, and the need for a commemorative poem. But in taking the *fers*, what exactly does Fortune get? Readers grow exasperated with the narrator for his inability to answer this question, and this frustration is shared by the Black Knight, who twice reminds his interlocutor "I have lost more than thow wenest" ("I have lost more than you think," 744, 1306). For the Black Knight the answer seems self-evident: he has lost his love Whyt whose death he represents allegorically through the game. Yet the Black Knight's impatience cloaks the *fers*'s own complicated history as a male piece and the masculinities that lingered long after

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

its gender switch upon its arrival in Europe. It also masks the game's own precariousness as a metaphor for death, chess being something played again and again rather than a final and permanent change in state. Before working through the Black Knight's allegory, it is useful to look more closely at the history of chess itself and in particular the complicated residues of the queen's transgendered rebirth.

When chess arrived in Europe in the tenth century, the pieces experienced rapid changes as the game become a means to represent European social organization.[9] At the same time, many aspects of the earlier Arabic game lingered. Thus while the Persian word *shāh* immediately became the "rex" (king), the continued use of "checkmate" (*shāh māt*, or "the shāh is dead"), highlighted the game's lingering Persian and Arabic traces.[10] Even more telling was the use of "scacus / scachus," which very quickly came to signify all the pieces in the *ludus scacorum*, or "game of chessmen."[11] In this case of the *al-fīl* or "elephant," the form of the piece itself changed shape almost immediately, its animal-like shape morphing into a human figure. Like the *shāh*, the *al-fīl*'s name persisted, and throughout Europe *alphiles, alfinus, or aufin* became the chess piece recognizable as the bishop.[12]

Yet the transformation of the male *firzān* (or counselor) into a female *fers* (or queen) brought with it the most visible and complicated vestiges of its previous historical contexts, and these traces of the past adhered even as the game began to morph and spread throughout Europe. Such vestiges appear in the material iterations of the game itself and particularly in its anthropomorphic form, which can be seen clearly in deluxe sets such as the early twelfth-century "Charlemagne" chessmen and the later twelfth-century Lewis chessmen.[13] This turn toward anthropomorphism dovetails with the general tendency of medieval European cultures to see the board as a reflection of social order. Indeed, whereas the Eastern game's pieces—elephant, chariots, horses—drew attention to the game as a mode of conflict, Western names—knight, bishop, farmer—realigned the game's metaphorical overtone, emphasizing social stability.[14] Physical representations of chess pieces did not, however, completely erase the markers of the game's own history. In manuscript illuminations, the pieces appear as abstract figures sometimes indistinguishable from their Arab and Persian counterparts. In Arabic and Latin texts, a horsehead represented the knight, triangles with circular "heads" denoted pawns, and a castle-shaped object stood in for the rook.

These material traces of the game's history were accompanied by linguistic nonerasures, and again this was particularly pronounced in the case of the queen. The piece's name, *firz* or *firzān*, which circulated with little change

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

in Spain, France, and England, persisted even as the piece itself adopted a female pronoun. Not only was the name preserved, but it also lingered centuries after the game's arrival, with the queen identified in England as the *fers* or *fiers* as late as the seventeenth century. Even in territories where the *fers* became the *regina*, *reina*, or *koninginne* (queen), name changes did little to cover up the queen's lingering masculinities, and the ever-present possibility of pawn promotion modulated the queen's newly feminized identity.[15] As noted above, a pawn obtaining the final square of the board *had* to become a queen, a situation that meant both the original queen and the promoted pawn could occupy the board at the same time. This material transformation of pawn to queen thus destabilized the queen's own identity; if a promoted pawn could so easily adopt a queen's body, what should one make of the *regina* herself?[16]

What makes such transgender moments so interesting are the ways medieval players and writers sought to preserve them. One of the most basic ways to have "fixed" the queen's fluctuating gender would have been to change the rules of pawn promotion. If allowed to become a bishop or knight, a promoted pawn would have gained *more* power than a medieval chess queen, who in most places could advance only one square in a diagonal direction. This change would have not only limited this piece's transgendering—a promotion of a pawn to a bishop would not have disrupted the delicate balance of the king/queen pair—but also increased the speed and complexity of the game.

Instead of making this rule change, players preserved the pawn-to-queen promotion and enacted changes that *highlighted* the inherently instable gender identities at play. One such modification to the game prevented players from promoting a pawn unless the original queen had been captured. This rule appears in the eleventh-century *Einsiedeln* poem, a short poem of ninety-eight lines preserved in two manuscripts in Switzerland:

> Hoc iter est peditis, si quando pergit in hostem,
> Ordinis ad finem cumque meare potest
> Nam sic concordant: oblique tramite, desit
> Ut si regina, hic quod et illa queat.
>
> [It is thus that the pawn, if he is able to reach the end of his enemy's side of the board without getting taken, can move like a queen, as long as she is taken.][17]

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The poet's description of the pawn as moving "ut si regina" [like the queen] throws into relief the gender transformation that takes place as the promoted pawn becomes a new *regina*. The pawn's new gender is reaffirmed by the movement of the piece, a proxy for the imagined movements of a queen's physical body. Moreover, the *regina*'s physical removal from the board imagines the queen's symbolic death as a necessary means to facilitate the king's (re)union with a new figure, a piece whose male identity will be reestablished the moment the game ends.

Another rule modification shows a different negotiation of the game's potential for transgendering. Whereas the *Einseideln* author restricts the time at which pawn promotion can occur, fourteenth-century problem sets often stipulated that the promoted pawn take a different name in order to denote its new identity as a queen.[18] Under these rules, the original queen went by the title *regina* while the promoted pawn became the *fers*, a name that refers back to its earlier male antecedent at the same time that it embraces a new female identity. Notably, this change in name not only hearkens back to a male piece, it also imagines the king paired with two different figures, one of which has recently transformed from a male to a female piece. That both figures can move in the same fashion drives home the ability of the male pawn to take on the attributes of a female queen, an ability that further suggests that gender transformation could move just as easily in the other direction.

Alexander Neckam's twelfth-century *De Naturis rerum* provides a good example of the ways writers embraced rules that promoted gender fluidity. This treatise contains a short account of the game in which Neckam pauses to note the pawn's transgender switch:

> Cum vero expleto cursu ultimam tenet lineam reginæ dignitatem adipiscitur, sed sexus privilegio destitui videtur. Tiresiatur veniens ad Gades suas novoque fruitur incessu, Iphis alter. Angulariter incedit postquam sublimatus est qui in directum tendebat quamdiu privata erat persona.[19]
>
> [When in truth he obtains the final line of the course, he acquires the dignity [or rank] of the queen, but is also perceived as stripped of the rights of his sex. He is made like Tireseus coming to Gades, and he enjoys another move, just like Iphis. After he is elevated, he begins to move at an angle, he who was formerly moving straight as long as he was a regular person.]

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

For Neckam, who embraces the gender changes embedded in the pawn's promotion, gender-switching is tightly bound to a change in class status. Conceived of here as the pawn's "rights," masculinity is converted into an increase in social standing, a promotion gained through the loss of his sex. Neckam shores up the transgender aspects of this moment by invoking not only Tireseus but also Iphis, a less well-known mythical figure whose mother, ignoring Iphis's biologically female sexual organs, raises him as a boy until Juno eventually relents and transforms his female body into a male form. That Neckam sees Tiresius as "just like" Iphis ("Iphis alter") suggests his understanding of gender-crossing as moving in two directions. At the same time, his comparison throws into relief the masculine base still lurking at the heart of this transformation. Does Iphis resemble Tireseus because both experience female subjectivity or because both are, at heart, men? After all, whereas Tireseus eventually reassumes his male body, Iphis becomes permanently transformed, and the subsequent birth of his children authenticates his new physical identity.

Other players who used naming to distinguish a promoted pawn from a queen opted for the word *domina*.[20] As in the texts that use *fers* to describe a promoted pawn, manuscripts that record this name change imagine that a *domina* might appear on the board concurrently with the *regina*. A word whose meaning ranges from a lady of rank to a mother, *domina* highlights the promoted pawn's gender switch, and thus in some ways seems more insistent on the completeness of the pawn's change.[21] Indeed, by the end of the fifteenth century, vernacular versions of *domina* (*dame, dama, donna*) had come to replace *regina* and stand in for any queen, promoted or not, a change that still exists today in Scandinavia, Germany, and Holland.[22] Yet like the *fers*, the *domina* still does not completely throw off its masculine undertones, and its name offered a reminder of its newly forged identity, one that differed from that of the original queen. It is telling in this regard that by the sixteenth century, a Latin poem on chess refers to the promoted pawn as the "Amazon," a name that, like the Amazons themselves, produces a female identity predicated on its own partial erasure.[23]

Only at the end of the Middle Ages did the rules governing pawn promotion change; instead of changing a pawn to a queen, a player now had the choice to promote it to any piece. Yet even more than the above changes, this new rule testified to a desire to preserve the pawn-to-queen transformation. For this rule did not come alone but was accompanied by the biggest change

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

in the game itself: the queen's new moves.[24] Now instead of moving one square in any direction, the queen enjoyed unlimited movement along any axis. Given the queen's substantially increased powers, most players would now elect to do what previous rules required. And while a player might choose another piece, promoting to anything but a queen would defy all logic in the game.

While Neckam and the *Einsiedeln* author focus on chess games, allegorists who used the game to represent an idealized social order often had a greater investment in stabilizing the queen's identity. Indeed, the very pairing of the queen with the king, whose own transformation from *shāh* marks a different understanding of the piece, seems to perform this type of cisgendering work. A *shāh* might have many wives, but a king can have only one queen, and this elimination of polygamy in turn produces a secure binary through which to read these pieces.

The appeal to a heteronormative "naturalism" that undergirds the queen's relationship to the king is further strengthened by the queen's subsequent role as the conduit for royal succession. Her identity as royal mother is made explicit in Jacobus de Cessolis's *Liber de ludo scachorum*, which uses chess to imagine the body politic with all its constituent parts from the nobility to the farmers and blacksmiths, doctors and lawyers. In the chapter on the queen, Jacobus explains that "she is sette on his lifte syde is by grace gevyn to the kynge by nature and of right. For better is to have a kyng by successyon thenne by eleccion."[25] Here the queen's role on the board is in part determined by her role off of it. The only way for the king to pass power through succession is for her to bear his (presumably male) heir, an ability that no promoted pawn could have. This image of the queen's body as the means through which a kingdom defines itself foregrounds a biological essentialism that runs counter to the easy gender changes seen in Neckam or the *Einsiedeln* poet.

Not only does the queen's gender appear fixed, but also in Jacobus's imagined state the queen's biological sex is *validated* by the pawn in front of her. Imagined as a doctor, this piece's main responsibility is to tend to the queen's health:

> And therfore is the phisicien duly sette tofore the quene, so that it is figured that he ought to have in hymself chastyté and contynence of body. For hit apperteyneth som tyme unto the phisicien to vysite and cure

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> quenes, duchesses and countesses, and alle other ladyes, and see and beholde somme secrete sekenessis that falle and come otherwhile in the secretis of nature.
>
> (Book 3, ch. 5, ll. 844–48)

This description casts the queen's body as a physiological other, reaffirming her essential nonmaleness through her body's tendency toward sickness. These are, it seems, sicknesses that come to "duchesses, countesses and *all* other ladies." To be a woman (even an imagined one) is to be prone to physical ailments.

Yet other parts of Jacobus's treatise undercut these attempts to secure the queen's sex and gender. As we read further in this same chapter, we learn that the doctor must be on constant watch as

> . . . women ben likened unto softe wax or softe ayer, and therefore she is callyd mulier. . . . And hit happeth ofte tymes that the nature of them that ben softe and mole taketh sonner the inpressyon than the nature of men that ben rude and stronge."
>
> (Book 3, ch. 5, ll. 903–6)

Here, women's physical weakness is configured specifically as an inherent malleability, one that leaves her vulnerable to *any* change. Her body therefore needs constant surveillance lest her "softe and mole" nature take the impression of something else.

And indeed, by the time we reach the *Liber*'s final section, the queen's ability to move like a man becomes her strength. As he discusses the moves of the chess queen, Jacobus notes that the piece can advance on the board "as an alphyn" (Book 4, ch. 3, l. 209). Because she moves like a bishop, she should have "parfyt wysedom as the alphyns have, whiche ben juges, as hit sayd above in the chappytre of the quene" (Book 4, ch. 3, ll. 217–18). Jacobus's earlier distinctions between the sexes now start to blur in the shared movement of these pieces. This image of hybridity also surfaces in Jacobus's description of pawn promotion. Following the (now predictable) tradition of distinguishing the promoted pawn as a *fers* (or, in Caxton's case, a *fiers*), his description of the pawn's moves tellingly reveals the extent to which these two identities overlap. The *fiers* may "goo on al sides cornerwyse fro poynt to poynt onely as the quene, both fightyng and takyng whom he fyndeth in his waye" (Book 4, ch. 7, ll. 365–66). At three different points Jacobus reminds

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

us that the *fiers* takes on the "dygnyté of the queen," a comparison that not only foregrounds the pawn's transgendered state but also the queen's own perpetual potential to be embodied by a male other.[26]

I have traced the queen's long history in order to expose a general cultural investment in her transgender identity. Yet I would also like to suggest that in addition to the many complicated name changes surrounding the queen (*regina*, *fers*, *domina*, amazon, pawn) the actual mechanics of pawn promotion made visible the connection between gender change and animation. Although there is little recorded about how players actually played chess, the physical realities of pawn promotion are not hard to reproduce. When promoting a pawn, a player might return the original *regina* to the board, provided it had been captured. In this case the *regina* would stand in for the promoted pawn, her previously feminine body now relabeled a *fers* yet her form physically unchanged. If the queen had not been taken, a player might add something to the pawn to designate its new identity as a *fers*. The *fers*'s new movements point to a more fundamental shift in gender identity, one that coincided with its rebirth.

THE QUEEN AS/AND THE *FERS*

I now want to bring this history of the chess queen to bear on Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, a poem that embraces the chess queen's fluctuating identity and uses it to imagine a permeable line dividing life and death. As described above, a medieval chess pawn experiences a figurative death upon reaching the final square. The pawn's subsequent removal from the board enables the return of the queen's body. She is figuratively reborn through him, and this moment of rebirth comes at the moment of gender change. In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer plays with this trope, presenting Whyt through the eyes of an uncomprehending narrator who sees the queen as a *fers* and then suspends her final moment of death until the closing lines.

Chaucer's connection between gender change and bodily reanimation is not, however, confined to the chess game, appearing in the poem's opening accounts of the narrator's insomnia. When the narrator finishes the story he has read, he focuses in particular on the story of Queen Alcyone, who mourns her missing husband, Seys. In Chaucer's version of the Ovidian tale, Alcyone prays to Juno, asking to learn what has happened to her husband. Rather than answering Alcyone directly, the goddess commands Morpheus

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to "crepe" (144) into Seys's corpse and make it speak "as hyt was woned to doo" (150). Morpheus complies, taking up the "dreynte body," transporting it to Alcyone, and telling her what has happened. Unlike pawn promotion, Morpheus's superficially male identity does not mark this as a moment of dramatic gender change: both Morpheus and Seys are male. Yet Morpheus's own passive and sleeping body, which Juno's messenger finds in a deep, dark cave, troubles any gender fixity in this moment. Morpheus could, it seems, take on the aspect of any body, and his own form here appears passive and feminized as he becomes beholden to Juno's will.

This tendency toward feminization increases after the narrator finishes this story. Rather than identifying with Seys, the male narrator goes to great lengths to take on the more "feminized" aspects of Alcyone's character. Like Alcyone, he prays to Juno; falls asleep in bed; has a dream; and somewhere along the way finds himself "al naked" and vulnerable to the images he receives while sleeping. This adoption of Alcyone's behavior not only marks the narrator's rejection of his own masculinity but also marks his transition from conscious to unconscious; by becoming another version of Alcyone, he is able to fall asleep. At the same time, his subsequent dream throws open the question of animation altogether. When one is dreaming, is one animate or inanimate? Given the narrator's eight years of having "felynge in nothyng" (11), it seems just as likely that as Alcyone he has become animated out of his torpor.

As this opening frame thus suggests, Chaucer's poem does not merely align masculinity with animation and activity, and femininity with passivity and inertness. Rather it is fixed gender that produces a fixed state of being. By performing a type of gender-crossing and becoming a version of Alcyone, the narrator sleeps his way into a new state of existence. By contrast, Seys's prostrate and naked body can be only weakly (and temporarily) reanimated by Morpheus. Further, his (or it is Morpheus's?) last speech to Alcyone offers one final confirmation of their gender roles, a confirmation articulated immediately before the queen's permanent death.[27]

This early connection between gender-crossing and animation lays the groundwork for the appearance of the Black Knight, who shares the narrator's gender indeterminacy. On the one hand, the Knight's connection to Octavius's hunt and his status as a "wonder wel-farynge knyght" (452) suggests a type of hyper-masculinity. Yet on the other hand, this masculinity is warped by the profound sorrow that has physically altered the knight. Mourning has turned the knight's "hewe" sallow, rendered him nearly unable

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to move, and made him insensible to the approaching narrator. In short, he resembles Alcyone in his physical suffering, and in the steps he takes—Alcyone through prayer, and the Black Knight through song—to alleviate it. The knight's young age of "foure and twenty yer" (455) and his lack of beard further emphasize his alignment with Alcyone. Both highlight the gender indeterminacy of his body.

It is almost immediately after the narrator meets the knight that the poem returns to chess, a pastime rejected by the narrator in the poem's opening lines yet one that reemerges to become the defining metaphor for the questions of gender and life that Chaucer has been posing. The Black Knight's lengthy description of his game with Fortune, which runs over one hundred lines, is too long to reproduce here. But the passage below gives a sufficient sense of the various crossings—life/death, male/female—at play:

> "At the ches with me she gan to pleye;
> With hir false draughtes dyvers
> She staal on me and tok my fers.
> And whan I sawgh my fers awaye,
> Allas, I kouthe no lenger playe,
> But seyde, 'Farewel, swete, ywys,
> And farewel al that ever ther ys!'
> Therwith Fortune seyde 'Chek her!
> And mat in the myd poynt of the chekker,
> With a poun errant!' Allas."
> (652–61)

Setting aside the problematic alignments in this imagined game—for instance, the pairing of a Black Knight with a White Queen—it seems clear that the Knight's own understanding of his metaphor is one of straight-up loss: Fortune has taken this chess queen, a stand-in for his love, Whyt. Yet the gender indeterminacy of the game itself complicates these "straight"-up alignments. The presumably living body of "Whyt," who stands in for the dead historical figure of Blanche of Lancaster, becomes a "fers" taken by Fortune, the main player in the game, and the specter of masculine identity that lingers in this piece is further compounded in the actual moment of its loss. The queen is not taken by a bishop, knight, or rook, but by a "poun," the same piece that could furnish the substance of her figurative reanimation. Should the Black Knight move one of his own pawns to

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the final square, he would automatically regain his lost *fers*. The only thing that prevents this move, it seems, is the Black Knight himself, who can "no lenger playe" when Whyt goes, and his impotence in turn allows Fortune to check and mate him.

Lest we dismiss the potential for reanimation embedded in the *fers*, Chaucer doubles back to it in the response of the hapless narrator who fails to understand what the Black Knight has just described. Interpreting the *fers* as a literal (and quite possibly male) piece, the narrator quickly insists that the Black Knight should not feel despondent. Even if he "had lost the ferses twelve" (723), the game could continue. Readers of the *Book of the Duchess* often note that moments like this confirm the narrator's self-promoted ignorance.[28] But in this case, ignorance comes not just through misunderstanding the Black Knight's allegorical language but also through the misrecognition of the piece itself. If a *fers* is a pawn, there can indeed be many of them, and the loss of a single one might have little bearing on the game. Or to use the narrator's own words, "ther is no man alyve her / Wolde for a fers make this woo!" (740–41).

This imagined proliferation of disposable *ferses*, a pointed contrast with a singular *fers* or original *regina*, in turn prompts the Black Knight's detailed inventory of Whyt's feminine attributes. Thus the narrator hears about her "white handes, and nayles rede," and "Rounde brestes," and the "good brede" of her hips (955–57). The Black Knight devotes four lines to her hair color alone, which is not red, or yellow, or brown but "most lyk gold" (858). And all this is a precursor to his long description of his courtship, thus reconfirming her status as feminized object, one subject to his own male pursuit.

In short, only by writing Whyt as female, a process that takes hundreds of lines, can the Black Knight shore up his own masculine identity. It is thus no coincidence that the moment in which the narrator finally recognizes "Whyt" as a stand-in for the Black Knight's love dovetails with the same moment that he understands the chess game as a metaphor:

> "She ys ded!" "Nay!" "Yis, be my trouthe!"
> "Is that youre los? By God, hyt ys routhe!"
> And with that word ryght anoon
> They gan to strake forth; al was doon,
> For that tyme, the hert-huntyng.
> With that me thoghte that this kyng
> Gan homwarde for to ryde. (1309–15)

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Here, in some of the most compact dialogue in Chaucer's oeuvre, the gender-crossings that have predominated are suddenly reversed. Whyt's identity, unknown to the narrator until this moment, changes from lost *fers* to Black Knight's dead lover. Yet this fixed gender comes at a price; Whyt now really is dead, a fact that Chaucer's narrator has verified with his "trouthe." This death of Whyt, her suddenly fixed identity as female, in turn produces a fixed identity in the Black Knight, who is no longer a knight but a "king," who, as it seems, has no more to say. He rides off and out of the poem, his departure jarring the narrator out of his dream and back into the world of life. This reclaiming of gender identity in turn affects the narrator, who ends both his sleepless state and his poem: "now hit ys doon."

THE *FERS* AS AN OBJECT-PERSON, OR THE CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have sidestepped distinctions between the chess *fers* and its connection to the "real" queens it ostensibly represented. Although some of this elision stems from this essay's own space constraints, my consideration of the *fers*-as-a-queen reflects the tendency of medieval audiences to animate objects and/or to see objects as animate extensions of living matter. After all, a cleric like Neckam would not bother to usher in stories of Tireseus as a means to talk about a pawn's gender switch if he saw the pawn as dead matter completely divorced from social investments.

Thus while in considering the chess queen's gender, I do not make any larger claims about the status of objects and their agency, it is fair to note that I also try not to assume that my understanding of medieval chess queens bears any resemblance to their status in Chaucer's world and, importantly, in the many centuries before it. It is undeniable that objects held a different status in the medieval world than they do in the modern one, and Chaucer's own vision of this particular object and the ways he uses it can help us explore larger ontological questions about life and nonlife.[29] What lent potency to Chaucer's animation of the chess queen are the polychronic traces that inform its materiality. As Jonathan Gil Harris has shown, cultural materialists have tended to privilege the "the sovereignty of the moment state," seeing in physical objects an "integrity and singularity" that in turn shores up the idea of a historical moment that differs from our own.[30] Yet the objects we use have their own histories, ones we cannot quite erase even if we tend to think of them as fixed in a historical present.

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Understanding the physical and cultural traces of the queen's masculine identities is, as I have argued, crucial to recognizing Chaucer's larger preoccupation with gender-crossing as well as the ways he aligns this crossing with the ability of bodies to change their state of being. Just as a promoted pawn on a chessboard provides the catalyst for the chess queen's rebirth, so too do Chaucer's characters use gender-crossing as a means of reanimation, with the further suggestion that those outside the poem's world might do well to follow the same advice.

Notes

1. Joan Morton Jones, *The Chess of Love (Old French Text with Translation and Commentary)*, (PhD diss., The University of Nebraska, 1968), 11.

2. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, in the *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987). Subsequent references to this edition will be noted by line number parenthetically in the body of the essay.

3. This idea of communication between writers across time comes across even more clearly in another of Chaucer's early dream visions, *The House of Fame*.

4. Reanimating stories and actors is a common theme for Chaucer and his peers. In "The Matter of Armenia in the Age of Chaucer," Carolyn Collette maps the ways the fall of Armenia lingered and as literature "continued to kindle the popular imagination" long after the prime actors in this confrontation had died. In many ways, Collette's "diachronic and synchronic" approach has influenced my own. See Carolyn P. Collette and Vincent J. DiMarco, "The Matter of Armenia in the Age of Chaucer," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 317–58, at 358 and 317.

5. In her recent book, *Making Chaucer's Book of the Duchess: Textuality and Reception* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), Jamie C. Fumo compares this moment to a similar moment in Charles of Orleans's *Fortunes Stabilnes*, a text that amplifies this potential for rebirth by returning to an earlier metaphor, that of the phoenix, which Charles uses to imagine a renewal, albeit one that will come through his union with another woman.

6. *As in* modern chess, medieval chess players practiced pawn promotion; a pawn that reached the far side of the board would be "promoted" to another piece. *Unlike* modern chess, which allows the player to promote the pawn to any piece, the medieval pawn could *only* become a queen. Medieval rules for the game varied. Yet the rule of pawn promotion was surprisingly consistent in all regional versions of the game. Murray, *History of Chess*, 452–85.

7. Deborah Horowitz, "An Aesthetic of Permeability: Three Transcapes of the *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 39.3 (2005), 259–79 at 260.

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

8. Mark N. Taylor, "Chaucer's Knowledge of Chess," *Chaucer Review* 38.4 (2004): 299–313; Guillemette Bolens, "Chess, Clocks, and Counsellors in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 35.3 (2001): 281–93; Jenny Adams, "Pawn Takes Knight's Queen: Playing at Chess in the *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 34.2 (1999): 125–38; Guillemette Bolens, "The Game of Chess in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 32.4 (1998): 324–34; Margaret Connolly, "Chaucer and Chess," *Chaucer Review* 29.1 (1994): 40–44; S. W. Stevenson, "Chaucer's Ferses Twelve," *ELH* 7.3 (1940): 215–22; W. H. French, "Medieval Chess and the Book of the Duchess," *Modern Language Notes* 64.4 (1949): 261–64.

9. For a more extensive discussion of this change, see my own *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

10. Murray, *History of Chess*, 394–400.

11. In English, "checks" also came to refer to the squares on the board. Murray, *History of Chess*, 394–400.

12. Four names of European origin record this transformation of the elephant, which became in various parts of Europe a sage man (Italy), a bishop (England, France, Germany, and Iceland), a count (Germany), or a fool (France). Murray, *History of Chess*, 424.

13. For a more detailed analysis of chess as an allegory for social order, see my *Power Play*, 1–14.

14. Chess pieces everywhere existed in abstract sets and actual carvings of forms. But whereas non-European sets reproduced animals and men (Murray, *A History of Chess*, 87), European pieces featured male and, in the case of the queen, female figures. The only piece still associated with an animal was (and still is) the knight. In *shatranj*, the version of chess that existed in the Arab empire, pieces did not customarily appear as images of people or men (Murray, 223).

15. Places that changed the name to *regina* or *Koninginne* were predominantly in Italy and Germany. For Murray, "the fact that *firz* was adopted and not translated in some of the European languages proves that the meaning of the Arabic name was not understood" (Murray, *History of Chess*, 423). Perhaps. But the immediate transition along with the eventual replacement of *firz* by *regina* suggests that more might be at work.

16. That some philosophers saw women as producing reproductive seed similar to sperm is indicative of the hazy and constantly moving gender lines at play. See Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) in particular 105–227.

17. The *Einseideln Poem*, in Murray, *History of Chess*, 514, lines 67–70.

18. Problem sets are endgame diagrams that challenge a player to mate the king in a given number of moves.

19. Alexander Neckam, *De Naturis rerum, libri duo, with the poem of the same*

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

author, De laudibus divinæ sapientiæ, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1863), 324–25. This passage is also reproduced in Murray, *History of Chess*, 511. Murray adds this quote from Ovid: "Sequitur puer Iphis euntem / Quam solita est maiore gradus" ("As her mother went, Iphis comes, with larger steps than she had normally taken.") I have modified Murray's Latin translation, which appears on p. 501 of his *History*.

20. Murray records this change in the fourteenth-century *Corpus Poem* (*History of Chess*, 427).

21. For Murray, whose *A History of Chess* appeared in the early twentieth century, the general tendency of players to change the queen's name was the most practical solution for the players whose "moral sense . . . was outraged" (426). The other solution, namely restricting pawn promotion until the queen was taken, "reduced the brightness of the game, and was opposed to its spirit" (*History of Chess*, 427). Yet Murray's analysis overlooks the fact that the promoted pawn still assumed a female name—by the fourteenth century, a promoted pawn was throughout Europe called *domina*—and fails to account for Neckam's titillating allusions to Tireseus. Rather than moral outrage, it seems that writers had a general desire to shore up and normalize the pawn's gender transformation.

22. Murray notes that *facere dominam* occurs nineteen times while *facere reginam* occurs only two times. See *History of Chess*, 427–28.

23. Murray, *History of Chess*, 791.

24. For an extended (albeit debatable) argument for the reasons behind the change in the queen's power, see Marilyn Yalom, *The Birth of the Chess Queen: A History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

25. William Caxton, *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series, ed. Jenny Adams (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), 26, lines 127–29. Subsequent reference to this work will be cited by book and chapter in the body of the essay. Caxton's work is a translation of Jacobus's work. For a Latin version of the *Libellus* produced nearer to the time of composition, see *Libellus de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludo scachorum*, ed. Sister Marie Anita Burt (PhD diss., The University of Texas, Austin, 1957).

26. These references to a pawn's ability to acquire "dignity" appear in lines 345, 351–52, 368–69.

27. This speech begins with ". . . My swete wyf / Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf," (201–2), an injunction easily read as a suggestion that the "wyf" let go of "lyf" altogether.

28. Offering a counterview, Arthur Bahr argues that "the Narrator may be neither dullard nor psychotherapist, but simply confused at and impatient with the Black Knight's generalizing, idealizing language; and he and the Black Knight therefore repeatedly talk past each other." See Bahr's "The Rhetorical Construction of Narra-

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tor and Narrative in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 35.1 (2000) 43–59 at 50.

29. Chaucer might be acting a bit like the members of the current *postmedieval* collective, who often view things from the position of an object and in turn use this idea of animation to challenge human exceptionalism. A good example of the *postmedieval* collective's efforts in this regard is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects* (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012). Even more recent critics of object-oriented ontology (OOO) such as Andrew Cole call less for a wholesale departure from OOO than for its contextualization in a philosophical history that accounts for medieval frameworks of thought. See Cole, "The Call of Things," *minnesota review* 80 (2013): 106–18.

30. Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 2–3.

Works Cited

Adams, Jenny. "Pawn Takes Knight's Queen: Playing at Chess in the *Book of the Duchess*." *Chaucer Review* 34, no. 2 (1999): 125–38.

Adams, Jenny. *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

Alexander Neckam. *De Naturis rerum, libri duo, with the poem of the same author, De laudibus divinæ sapientiæ*. Ed. Thomas Wright. London: Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1863.

Bahr, Arthur. "The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*." *Chaucer Review* 35, no. 1 (2000): 43–59.

Bolens, Guillemette. "Chess, Clocks, and Counselors in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*." *Chaucer Review* 35, no. 3 (2001): 281–93.

Bolens, Guillemette. "The Game of Chess in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*." *Chaucer Review* 32, no. 4 (1998): 324–34.

Cadden, Joan. *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Caxton, William. *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*. Ed. Jenny Adams. TEAMS Middle English Text Series. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ed. *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*. Washington, DC: Punctum Books, 2012.

Cole, Andrew. "The Call of Things." *minnesota review* 80 (2013): 106–18.

Collette, Carolyn P., and Vincent J. DiMarco. "The Matter of Armenia in the Age of Chaucer." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 317–58.

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Connolly, Margarett. "Chaucer and Chess." *Chaucer Review* 29, no. 1 (1994): 40–44.
French, W. H. "Medieval Chess and the *Book of the Duchess*." *Modern Language Notes* 64, no. 4 (1949): 261–64.
Fumo, Jamie C. *Making Chaucer's* Book of the Duchess*: Textuality and Reception* Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015.
Harris, Jonathan Gil. *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
Horowitz, Deborah. "An Aesthetic of Permeability: Three Transcapes of the *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 39, no. 3 (2005): 259–79.
Jacobus de Cessolis. "Libellus de Moribus Hominum et Officiis Nobilium Ac Popularium Super Ludo Scachorum." Ed. Sister Maria Anita Burt (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1957).
Jones, Joan Morton. *The Chess of Love* (Old French Text with Translation and Commentary). PhD Diss. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1968.
Murray, H. J. R. *A History of Chess*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913.
Stevenson, S. W. "Chaucer's Ferses Twelve." *ELH* 7, no. 3 (1940): 215–22.
Taylor, Mark N. "Chaucer's Knowledge of Chess." *Chaucer Review* 38, no. 4 (2004): 299–313.
Yalom, Marilyn. *The Birth of the Chess Queen: A History*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Wed, 04 May 2022 19:06:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms